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ABSTRACT

Questions that the general public may have about the six national educational goals formulated by President Bush and the U.S. state governors in 1990 and the administration's plan for educational reform are addressed in this digest. Ten questions and brief answers are presented in the following areas: defining the goals; the attainability, priorities and funding of the goals; national testing; school choice; teacher quality; community role; mathematics and science excellence; and emphasis on citizenship. Achieving the national goals depends upon public recognition of their importance and sustained collaborative effort. (7 references) (LMI)

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The National Education Goals: Questions and Answers

by Beverly B. Swanson

American citizens agree that the time has come to improve our schools and support the nation's leaders in their call for sweeping education reforms. Goals have been stated, objectives written, and a plan developed (AMERICA 2000) for fundamental changes in the American educational system. The public, however, raises legitimate questions concerning the purpose and attainment of these goals.

This Digest addresses questions the general public may have about the six national goals and the President's plan for educational reform.

Question 1: What are the six national goals for education?

Briefly stated, the education goals are: (1) that by the year 2000, all children will start school ready to learn; (2) that 90 per cent of high school students will graduate; (3) that students will be competent in basic subjects and exhibit responsible citizenship; (4) that U.S. students will lead the world in mathematics and science; (5) that every American adult will be literate; and (6) that schools will be drug-free and safe (Executive Office of the President, 1990).

Question 2: Are the goals attainable?

The most recent Gallup Poll of 1,594 adults (Elam, 1990) shows widespread support for the goals. The goals with the highest approval (88%) were the call for children to be ready to start school and for children leaving grades 4, 8, and 12 to demonstrate competency in basic subject areas. Poll respondents indicated that the school readiness goal may be the most attainable.

Question 3: Which goal is the most important for the general public to implement?

Although not directly stated as a national goal, more parental or adult intervention in children's lives is needed to improve American education. For years, education research has demonstrated the importance of parental involvement, but most contacts of parents with schools have been superficial (Henderson, 1987; Peterson, 1989). Effective schools involve parents in their children's learning and in their school life. Adults need to talk to children about school, stress the importance of school by providing a supportive learning environment in the home and helping students develop good study habits, and work with communities and schools in creative ways to involve parents in their children's education.

Question 4: How does school choice fit in with the national goals to improve American education?

The national goals are part of a comprehensive education reform strategy known as AMERICA 2000. State and local choices for parents and students are seen as critical to improving schools and will be promoted as part of AMERICA 2000. The central incentive for change is competition. If families have choices in selecting schools for their children, some schools will improve to stay in the business of educating children. School choice could also benefit children who could not otherwise attend a private or parochial school, but additional resources would have to be made available for this to occur. For example, businesses have donated money so that children from low-income families may attend private schools; the "voucher system," in which state funds follow the student, would allow some students to attend private schools.

Question 5: Will the federal government put more money into education to fund the six national goals?

Although the federal price tag for the first year of the education plan (1992) will be relatively small, resources will be redirected, and new sources will be sought through the business community. Most of the money will go to establish 535 or more model or exemplary schools to demonstrate for other schools innovative educational techniques. Some funds will be allocated for locally devised programs to allow parents to choose schools for their children, and a smaller amount will be used to identify and reward outstanding students and teachers.

Question 6: Does the plan for education improvement involve national testing?

The education strategy outlined recently by President Bush has called for national testing, but on a volunteer basis. The test results may be used for college admissions

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and also by some employers for hiring workers. To measure whether progress toward the national goals has been made at the specified grades (4, 8, and 12), reliable means of measurement will need to be developed, tested, and applied across the nation's schools. Whether or not these tests will eventually be mandated is not presently known.

Question 7: Does the new education plan address the quality of teachers?

A key part in the new education initiative is to increase salaries for those teachers that teach challenging subject matter—and teach it well—in such areas as math, science, English, geography, and history. Alternative certification systems will be developed to allow new college graduates with degrees in disciplines other than education to become teachers. Furthermore, teacher training institutions have been reviewing their teacher preparation programs over the last 5 years. As a result, many institutions now require elementary teachers to demonstrate indepth knowledge through a second degree or concentration in an academic area, e.g., math, science, or history. This requirement does not suggest that teaching skills and methods are being removed from the preparation of teachers. Rather, the stress on having a content area specialty, along with teaching skills and methods, will increase the quality of teaching in schools.

Question 8: What role will communities take in the proposed education reforms?

Education partnerships, volunteer work, and community service in the schools are being advocated by our nation's leaders. Strong and constant community involvement is needed to meet the goals of safe, drug-free schools, nationwide literacy for all, and high graduation rates. Communities may want to develop their own plans for improvement by establishing model programs and public-private partnerships to fund particular local incentives, e.g., student and teacher achievement. Each community should examine the six national goals in light of the needs of its children and families. The community as a whole must send the same message to all children and their parents: "School is important and your community values education."

Question 9: How can America be number one in math and science by the year 2000?

It is alarming that Americans' scientific literacy has decreased as our world has become more scientific and technological. In the last decade, improvement initiatives have been developed, but the country needs to go much further in these efforts. One initiative has been developed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to help reform science, mathematics, and technology education in the United States by addressing such questions as: What is the nature of scientific knowledge and skills? How can scientific literacy be achieved across the nation? Knowledge about science and math concepts should begin early and continue throughout each individual's lifespan in order for Americans to be both knowledgeable and competitive in the technological arena.

Question 10: How can communities stress citizenship?

According to a recent survey, the youth of America are apathetic about civic values and responsibilities (National Assessment of Education Progress, 1990). Families and schools must influence youth to take an active part in their communities by stressing civic values and activities. The best way to teach the young is through serving as role models: adults need to gather information and discuss issues, to vote, to volunteer to help others, and to encourage their children to do the same.

The six national goals and the education strategies springing from these goals will have a great impact on schools and schooling in the next decade.

The solvable problems in education are those deemed important by the general public. Thus, all able and concerned Americans should examine the six national goals and exert influence and energy in areas in which they can effect change. It is only through such a collaborative effort that excellence in education can be achieved.

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